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Port proposed expansion expected to draw a crowd to the Long Beach council

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LONG BEACH - Eight years, several million dollars and more than a few lawsuits later, the final verdict on the port's \$750-million, 10-year Middle Harbor Project is now in the hands of the City Council.

Opponents and supporters of Middle Harbor redevelopment - which would transform and modernize 345 acres at the port's core - are expected to crowd Tuesday's council meeting as council members deliberate the project's fate.

The project was unanimously approved by the Long Beach Harbor Department in April, but several opponents led by the City of Riverside appealed the decision to the council a week later.

Appellants questioned the project's impact on inland rail traffic and said \$5 million set aside to address greenhouse gases is inadequate, and are asking the council for revisions.

The council can't deny the project outright,

but has the authority to demand changes by a majority vote. That outcome, however, is considered unlikely given the project's widespread support among area businesses and labor organizations desperate for jobs in a sour economy.

The project would modernize three aging marine terminals totaling 345 acres on piers D, E and F during the next decade, allowing for a doubling of cargo through those facilities by project's end.

By incorporating new low-emission equipment like electric cranes, and additional rail and hybrid yard equipment, port authorities expect to cut on-site emissions in half by 2020.

But opponents disagree with those findings, saying the proposal doesn't adequately address environmental impacts outside of harbor communities.

The port spent several years and millions of dollars preparing the Middle Harbor Environmental Impact Report and held community hearings in the summer of 2008 to explain its impact.

Those hearings produced at least 63 written comments and several hours of testimony from supporters and opponents.

Upon its approval by the harbor board,

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Commission President Jim Hankla said Middle Harbor redevelopment was "critical to the competitiveness of the port."

"We believe that with our exhaustive EIR, review by experts, diligent community outreach and multiple public meetings we have more than met the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act," Hankla said.

If it proceeds, officials expect to break ground by winter, with development supporting at least 1,000 construction jobs annually for a decade, with several thousand more jobs on site upon completion.

The Middle Harbor hearing will begin no earlier than 5 p.m. at City Hall, 333 W. Ocean Blvd.

The council's regular meeting time has been moved up from 5 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., while a closed session that had been scheduled for 4:30 p.m. is now cancelled. City Clerk Larry Herrera said the intent is for the council to get some of the routine matters out of the way before the Middle Harbor hearing.

The meeting can be viewed live on Charter Communications Channel 8 or online at www.longbeach.gov.

Budget meeting

Before the regular meeting, the council will have a special meeting at 3:30 p.m. to discuss the city's budget problems.

City officials are putting the last touches on a plan to eliminate a current \$19.2 million deficit in the \$404 million general fund with employee furloughs. The current fiscal year ends Sept. 30.

But that's only the tip of the iceberg.

In the 2010 and 2011 fiscal years, city officials are expecting a deficit of \$54.8 million. Tax revenues, property taxes and oil revenues, among other funding sources, have all plummeted.

On Tuesday, city management will give the council a "preview" of the 2010 budget, the meeting agenda says. Deep cuts to programs and worker layoffs are almost certain, unless officials can find creative ways to cut costs or create new revenue.

Documents transparency

Fifth District Councilwoman Gerrie Schipske has placed two items on the agenda Tuesday that deal with city documents and government transparency.

The first is a matter that seems to have already been resolved - the release of confidential city documents about the Los

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Cerritos Wetlands deal. The council voted 6-3 in closed session last week not to release the documents to the public, but Schipske said she is keeping her reiteration of the proposal on the agenda.

In a separate agenda item, Schipske wants City Attorney Robert Shannon to provide the council with guidance on policies and procedures for retaining electronic documents. She expressed concern when it was revealed last month during a council meeting that city e-mails don't have to be saved for the public record and are considered to be similar to phone calls.

Colorado Lagoon funding

The Colorado Lagoon restoration project and three Long Beach storm water pump stations may become the next local beneficiaries of President Barack Obama's stimulus package known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Because state budget problems forced bond funding to be frozen in December, Long Beach lost funding for several projects at Colorado Lagoon in East Long Beach. As part of a lagoon renovation project, state bonds were to fund the installation of a low-flow sewer diversion system, construction of a bio-swale drainage system to filter pollution from stormwater runoff and clean-up work.

Similarly, the city lost funding for stormwater pump station upgrades to trap debris and trash at three pumping stations.

The council is being asked to authorize moving forward on those projects so that they can qualify for loans through the federal stimulus package - \$3.5 million for Colorado Lagoon and \$1.7 million for the pump station upgrades.

Long Beach already has received millions of dollars in federal stimulus funding for health, housing, homelessness and job training programs.

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